

Roman globalization

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For a century scholars have been observing the globalization of the modern world. Globalization was a phenomenon not unknown in the ancient world, and here Neville Morley investigates how ancient and modern globalization differs and explores the particular character of ancient globalization.

In the early 1920s, M. I. Rostovtzeff, the leading historian of ancient economic and social life, reflected on possible similarities between the present and the past.

The creation of a uniform world-wide civilization and of similar social and economic conditions is now going on before our eyes over the whole expanse of the civilized world. This process is complicated, and it is often difficult to clear up our minds about it. We ought therefore to keep in view that this condition in which we are living now is not new, and that the ancient world also lived, for a series of centuries, a life which was uniform in culture and politics, in social and economic conditions. The modern development, in this sense, differs from the ancient only in quantity and not in quality. (A History of the Ancient World, published 1926)

Rostovtzeff was not only responding to the aftermath of the first 'world' war; he must also have been thinking of the revolution in his home country of Russia – he was now in exile in Wisconsin in the United States. Both developments had shaken the entire world, and showed how interconnected everything was. They had also revealed how major events were largely or entirely beyond the control of individual human actors. Understanding a complex, global society thus involved the study of impersonal processes.

An homogenized empire

The Roman Empire was, as Rostovtzeff observed, increasingly integrated and homogenized. Different parts of the Mediterranean, and then large areas of Europe, were incorporated into a single political system, albeit a loosely-organized system that left most power in the hands of local aristocrats. This was followed by far-reaching changes in economy, society, and culture, especially in

the western provinces. Individual regions became better connected to the wider world, supplying goods to other regions of the Empire and receiving new goods in return. The use of common languages and common coinage spread. Individuals changed their way of life – their clothing, their houses, their diet, even their religion – and the cultural differences between different areas became less marked.

The political integration of the Empire had often been violent, directed by ambitious Roman politicians and generals. The process of its economic, social, and cultural integration was peaceful, and not directed by anyone. In recent years, historians have started to follow Rostovtzeff in wondering whether the parallel with the modern globalized world – permanently interconnected through the internet, with McDonalds and Starbucks in every city – might be useful. They are not looking, as he did, to use the past to explain the present, but rather to see if modern theories of globalization can also help us understand the past.

Time and space

The city appears a kind of common emporium of the world. Cargoes from India and, if you will, even Arabia the Blessed, one can see in such numbers as to surmise that in those lands the trees will have been stripped bare and that the inhabitants of those lands, if they need anything, must come here and beg for a share of their own. Your farmlands are Egypt, Sicily, and all of cultivated Africa.

(Aelius Aristides, Oration 6)

Especially if we view the Roman world from its centre, the global mega-city on the River Tiber, it is easy to be impressed by the extent of Roman globalization. Goods from every part of the known world flowed into the capital, as did people from every region (not always a good thing, as

we can see in the anti-immigrant rants of Juvenal). However, it was not just Rome. The inhabitants of distant regions like Britain enjoyed wine from southern Gaul, olive oil from Spain, and fine *terra sigillata* pottery from Italy, as we can see in the archaeological record. The people of the empire developed similar tastes for many things, and the merchants of the empire worked to supply them.

This certainly resembles modern developments. However, there are also some significant differences that should not be ignored. Modern globalization is driven to a large extent by what some geographers have called 'time-space compression': as travel and communications technology improve, the world becomes effectively smaller. Transporting goods becomes quicker and cheaper, and news travels ever faster. The development of a true global market rests above all on the rapid exchange of information, so that a poor harvest in one region, or a new demand for goods in another, has an immediate effect on prices everywhere.

In the Roman Empire, travel remained slow and expensive, and communications could travel no faster than the fastest available form of transport. The spread of Roman roads, and the imposition of Roman peace, certainly made travel less risky and expensive, but this could never lead to the step-change in the speed of communication produced by the steamship, the electric telegraph, or the internet. Far from becoming effectively smaller, the Empire became actually bigger, as more regions were added and so the task of the Roman state in monitoring and controlling the provinces became ever greater.

The absence of significant time-space compression also meant that the process of economic and social integration was also very uneven. Rome itself was at the heart of a dense network of connections and trade routes, a truly global city. Cities and regions that were involved in this network could also benefit from the flows of goods and information that passed through them. More remote rural areas, especially in distant provinces, might not receive news until months later – a far greater problem than slow broadband speeds.

Reflexive identities

The nation which used to reject the Latin language began to aspire to rhetoric; further, the wearing of our dress became a distinction, and the toga came into fashion, and little by little the Britons went astray into alluring vices: promenades, baths, sumptuous dinners. The simple natives gave the name 'civilization' to this aspect of their slavery.

(Tacitus, Agricola 21)

Another theme in modern globalisation theory seems closer to the Roman experience, that of cultural change. In the past, this has often been understood as 'Romanization', the imposition of Roman culture on the natives (as Tacitus here describes the activities of Agricola as governor in Britain), despite the lack of evidence that the Romans ever sought to impose their culture. More recently, historians have emphasized the way that the natives chose to 'become Roman'.

Globalization theory suggests that, within a globalizing world, *all* cultural identity becomes a matter of negotiation and construction, rather than something which is given. Individuals become conscious of the range of possible choices beyond their own traditions; they reflect on their own culture in comparison with others, and reflect on foreign cultures in relation to their own. Thus it is not just a matter of provincials in Gaul or Britain creating new identities out of the exciting range of possibilities offered to them by the rest of the Empire – putting on a toga, starting to drink more wine, and so forth. The Romans themselves were in the same position, having to re-think what it meant to be Roman in this new world. Some adopted new practices (the most striking example being the incorporation of Greek culture); others sought to remain true to what they now saw as traditional Roman values. There was, in other words, no such thing as a pure Roman culture to which Rome's subjects reacted. 'Roman' culture in Italy was just as much a hybrid, just as much a construction, as the developing 'Gallo-Roman' or 'Romano-British' cultures in the provinces.

Winners and losers

This process of cultural reflection and change can appear to be wholly voluntary; after all, no one forces you to eat at McDonalds. Likewise, perhaps you just wanted something quick and convenient to eat, rather than eating a Big Mac in order to make a cultural statement. But it may make a cultural statement whether you like it or not – even if you've eaten there because there was no real alternative. Roman provincials may have found themselves in the same position. They may have had no choice about using Roman coinage, if they had to pay taxes

or rents in cash or buy what they needed in the market; but by using Roman money they became a little bit more Roman, and were exposed to all the political imagery on the coins. Learning Latin, even for purely pragmatic purposes – to do business, for example, or to deal with Roman officials – involved exposure to the Roman literary classics and their values, like Vergil's celebration of Roman imperialism in the *Aeneid*.

Individual choices bring unintended consequences, and not every choice is a free one. Globalization was and is uneven, not just geographically but in terms of its winners and losers. The Roman political elite benefited, naturally; a more homogeneous and integrated empire was easier to rule, and they could draw on the resources of the whole world. Their subjects perhaps enjoyed greater peace and security, and were happy with bath-houses, Latin literature, and law (the whole 'What the Romans did for us...' package) – but they lost their freedom, and much of their local culture.

A more integrated and globalized world was also more vulnerable to certain threats. With its regular trade routes and population concentrated in cities, it was the perfect environment for the spread of epidemic disease, such as the plague that devastated the Empire under the Antonines in the second century A.D. The more complex the system, the less that anyone has understanding of how it works, let alone any control of it. This was precisely the concern of M. I. Rostovtzeff, whose later work on *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* concluded with the unanswered question of whether the modern world would be able to escape the fate that overcame the Roman Empire.

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